

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORMS
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THE HONORABLE TOM DAVIS, CHAIRMAN



Testimony of
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Good morning Chairman Davis and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am Peter LaPorte, Director of the District of Columbia's Emergency Management Agency.

A little more than a year ago I had the honor of testifying before the Subcommittee on the District of Columbia, Committee on Appropriations about the District of Columbia's preparedness program. At that hearing I detailed for Chairman Joe Knollenberg and members of the Subcommittee the extensive measures the District of Columbia had taken since 9/11 to prepare for all-hazards.

I was proud then to explain what the District had done to prepare itself, and I am pleased to say today that my pride in the District's preparedness has not diminished. In fact, my pride has grown by leaps and bounds as the District met the challenge of Hurricane Isabel and continues to prove itself to the citizens of the District and to the nation.

Today, I will not dwell upon our extensive preparedness efforts over the last two years, but I would like to focus on a couple of key preparedness factors that proved extremely beneficial to the District in its hurricane response.

First, when the District decided to craft its new District Response Plan or DRP to mirror the Federal Response Plan (FRP) of the federal government, we were convinced that it would pay dividends in any major disaster. We were proved right in Isabel. We followed the DRP to the letter and it proved to be the touchstone for our success. The Federal Response plan works. The District response Plan works. Let's build on that success.

Secondly, our investment in our human resources paid off. We have conducted five exercises in this year alone and participated in dozens more hosted by other state and federal agencies. In fact, we played an exercise almost exactly a year ago with our partners at the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOG) in which a storm with the exact track of Hurricane Isabel was part of the scenario. It was déjà vu for us when Isabel followed the same path.

We also have trained thousands of District employees, from the Mayor on down, in all aspects of emergency management. I can say without reservation that our people are among the best-trained responders of any city in the nation.

Thirdly, our investment in our physical plant and equipment was worth every dime. We have a new EOC with state of the art technology. We have the most comprehensive communications back-up plan in the nation. We did not lose communications capability at any point in the storm. As you can see, I am a believer in preparedness.

Last but no means least, we have increased our investment in community preparedness. We have involved universities and schools, businesses, advisory neighborhood commissions, special interest groups and individual citizens in our community preparedness and outreach activities. When Isabel struck, we had open lines of communications with all of these stakeholders to let them know how to prepare and what to expect from the storm.

Now I'd like to highlight some of our activities prior to, during and immediately after the storm. We activated our Crisis Management Team before the storm. We were monitoring the National Hurricane Center forecasts days ahead of landfall and we took action.

- Mayor Williams lead the early decision-making on preparedness actions, several days before the storm made landfall.
- We staffed the new EOC with competent and experienced emergency liaison officers from every function of our DRP and from appropriate utilities.
- We instituted Incident Action Planning under the incident command system. We developed action plans for each operational period to drive the Mayor's priorities for the District and to share our expectations with FEMA and our federal partners.
- The District handed out 20,000 sand bags to citizens and businesses prior to landfall. We also purchased 10 generators,

and worked with the Water and Sewer Administration (WASA) to prepare our catch basins for a massive influx of water.

- Two days before the storm hit, Mayor Williams convened a meeting to bring together heads of our lead DRP agencies with members of our faith community, ANC commissioners and other community leaders so that he could enlist community participation and support to help get out our preparedness message.

We focused heavily on interagency coordination and communications with our partners in the public and private sectors.

- We participated in daily video teleconferences with FEMA, the National Hurricane Center, Virginia, Maryland and other state and regional federal agencies. We shared information about resources and strategies, and we consulted with our partner states in the Emergency Management Assistance Compact.
- A Joint Information Center was established under ESF-14 of our District Response Plan to manage public information and coordinate the twice-daily press briefings convened by the mayor and the news summaries that were issued each morning and evening.
- We worked closely with Metro on its deliberations to suspend Metro services and the impact of its decision on government closings and the public's ability to move in the pre-impact phase of the storm.
- We coordinated with WASA and PEPCO about the potential loss of services such as power and water supplies and reviewed contingency plans for emergency electrical generation and water and ice distribution.
- We activated our new EOC and it served us well. We had the ability to monitor the pulse of the District response in real time from our nerve center. We have a few bugs to work out, but nothing that impacted on our operation.

- The Mayor declared a Public Safety Emergency to ensure that all of the District's resources were committed to the response of the aftermath of Isabel as well as paving the way for potential federal assistance.
- We requested supplies and materials such light towers, heavy duty trucks and manpower from the DC National Guard, and sandbags and technical assistance from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, one of our most reliable and effective federal partners throughout this response.
- And, when it became apparent that it was the most prudent course, the Mayor decided to close the District Government, one of the most important and effective decisions of the operation. The federal government and Metro likewise made the same decision. This coordination was achieved through the Regional Incident Communications and Coordination System (RICCS) and it worked well.

During the height of the storm we all did pretty much the same thing. We hunkered down in the EOC or our homes and offices and watched the storm's fury through our windows or on our TVs for as long as we could. When the winds had diminished to a level that allowed us to begin to assess the storm's impact, we hit the streets with our rapid response capability.

- Our current working estimate for storm damages exceeds \$10 million.
- The District updated the emergency information on its website 150 times in addition to going door-to-door in some areas with food and ice distribution information.
- The District Energy Office worked tirelessly to coordinate with PEPCO on the electrical outage estimates and priorities for restoration. We had an active running count of outages every few hours as a planning basis for ordering generators and ice and food supplies.

- A large amount of damage resulted from fallen trees and storm debris. We tracked the removal of 1600 downed trees that were impacting the District in one way or another. Some trees blocked access and others impeded power restoration. Our Metropolitan Police Department, Department of Public Works and District Department of Transportation closely coordinated the priorities for debris removal in support of our overall daily action plan.
- As a result of the loss of power to thousands of residents, we provided ice supplies throughout the city for refrigeration purposes. Our estimates are that we distributed 750,305 pounds of ice through 4 locations servicing 21,824 citizens. The US Army Corps of Engineers procured and delivered the ice under mission assignment from FEMA. The District received and distributed the ice directly to the public through a number of strategically placed distribution centers.
- Without power and without school breakfasts and lunches, many children and older people were not being fed. Through the efforts of our ESF 6 –Mass Care – the District Department of Human Services determined care and feeding requirements, opened shelters where needed, determined the needs of special populations and activated more than 300 volunteer staff to serve over 22,200 meals, 15,000 of which were to school children.
- The District’s entire school system was impacted and when the coordinated decision to open schools occurred, 15 schools of 147 remained closed. Schools were impacted by the storm either through blocked access from fallen trees, drainage problems, power outages and interior or exterior damages. We recognized the importance of getting kids back to school so we formed an interdisciplinary group or “Tiger Team” to tackle the problem. We were quickly able to call together a team to assess the issues – loss of power, flood damage, access issues around the schools – at which point we sent work crews to the areas to correct the deficiencies and speed school reopening.

- Flood preparations were made with sandbagging in many low-lying areas. Following the flooding caused by the storm, we monitored closely the potential for recurring floods of some of the same areas. Fortunately, the crest on the Potomac was not as high as originally predicted, and although we did incur damage to our Metropolitan Police Department Harbor Branch office, for the most part, we experienced only some disruptions to traffic.
- Hundreds of traffic lights were rendered inoperable by the loss of electricity and falling trees and those intersections were manned by police who provided traffic control shortly after the storm. DDOT, DPW and MPD worked round the clock to get the lights back in operation. In the interim, temporary stop signs were installed where lights were out to ensure that everyone treated those intersections as 4-way stops.
- Many feared that there would be increases in crime due to sections of the city that were without power, some for more than a week. But the citizens and MPD pulled together to maintain law and order throughout the city.
- About the time we were hitting our stride and had a handle on the initial impact, we were stuck by the follow-on storm that in many regards surpassed Isabel in intensity, especially with respect to rainfall. With another 100,000 customers losing power, we once again put our plans into action and responded once more to the priorities of the day. We are now in the recovery phase of the disaster. That means that the response phase is over but considerable hard work remains for District and federal agencies. We have co-located a District recovery team with FEMA and other Federal Agencies at a Disaster Field Office (DFO) on Vermont Avenue. At the DFO the District and Federal agencies will coordinate three primary components of recovery assistance under the Presidential Declaration:
 - Individual Assistance to impacted and eligible individuals and families
 - Public Assistance to repair and replace damaged public facilities, and

- Mitigation Actions to prevent some damages from recurring in the future.

Most of this assistance is performed through a Federal – District Agreement that provides for 75% Federal - 25% District cost-sharing arrangements.

We have asked for assistance in manpower and staffing of the DFO from our Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) members in other states. We joined the compact last year and now are full EMAC members and are proud to be a part of this national mutual aid initiative.

The recovery operations will be underway for quite some time as the FEMA Federal Coordinating Officer's team phases out of the DFO and FEMA Region III in Philadelphia picks up the ball on continuing recovery closeout actions.

We have already begun an after-action review to look at our successes as well as any weaknesses in our plans and procedure that may have been revealed during our response. The George Washington University Institute for Crisis, Disaster and Risk Management is assisting us in this effort. The final report will provide recommendations on how to streamline response actions, update plans and better provide training to employees and citizens for future emergencies.

There is one final note that I would like to make as I close and that is that the Emergency Management Program of the District of Columbia recently was granted Full Accreditation by the new Emergency Management Accreditation Program or EMAP (not to be confused with EMAC).

The District is the first and only city thus far to be accredited under EMAP. Only one state has been accredited at this point of those that have been assessed. This is a Big Deal for us. Two short years ago, this would have been a distant dream. Now it is a firm reality. We have complied with every one of the national standards for emergency management and have written proofs of compliance and a certified peer review to prove it. That is a significant mark on the wall for the Mayor's preparedness program.

Our preparedness is the best that it has ever been, but it can and needs to be better. Threats change. People come and go. The emphasis shifts regularly. We must adapt and we must persist if we are to be ready for the storms of the future, natural or man-made. Relentless preparedness is the game.

We must maintain our preparedness; it is not a one-time thing. We must remain vigilant as we continue to strengthen our preparedness so that we are ready for new threats. And we must continue to build and strengthen our partnerships with our partners in the National Capital Region and the federal government.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the District of Columbia's response to and ongoing recovery from Hurricane Isabel. I would be happy now to answer any questions that you may have.